Brasilia's Triad: Conceived, Spontaneous, and Shifting Fields of Settlement

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In his essay "Between Power and Desire," Donald Preziosi argues that cities are constructs which, by their very nature, endlessly resist the certainty and specificity of either fashioner or user. He writes, "A city is not a city unless it occludes the laws of its composition and the rules of the game."[1] The use of the term "occlude" is of particular interest here. The notion that cities continuously *conceal or obstruct* conceived orders and logics also implies an alternative meaning – that cities are always filled with the possibility, at any moment, to move to a different kind of logic or legibility. Taking this even farther, the more the fashioners of cities attempt to neutralize conflicts and contradictions through their plans and programmes, the more certain the eventual occlusion of these plans and programmes becomes. No where is this inevitable circumstance of cities more apparent than in Brasilia and no other place embodies so clearly the inherent shifting fields constituting cities. This becomes particularly apparent when one considers the intricate web of Brasilia's triad of settlements – specifically, the conceived, the spontaneous and the recalibrated territories of the city.

THE CONCEIVED:
THE LAWS OF COMPOSITION AND RULES OF THE GAME

The conceived, in this context, alludes to Henri Lefebvre's three-fold concept of space: the perceived, the conceived, and the lived. For Lefebvre, the conceived is "conceptualized space, the space of the scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived."[2] Lefebvre's understanding of both conceived space and the fashioner of such spaces is important to Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan of Brasilia and, more precisely, to a few specific details surrounding the formulation and execution of that plan. In 1957, there was an international competition held calling for an overall plan proposal that would guide the construction of the new capital of Brazil. Of the competition submittals studied by the jury, Costa's Pilot Plan was alone in its attempt to determine, *from the outset*, the form of the completed city and to fully orchestrate the future extent of the city. The other proposals outlined a preferred pattern of growth and expansion and yet the ultimate form and shape of the new capital was generally allowed to evolve over time due to the actual "lived" circumstances of a growing city. This difference – and the fact that ultimately it was Costa's plan that was chosen – is certainly not unimportant in terms of the underlying politics surrounding the relocation of the capital of Brazil. At the time of the competition, the Federal District was located in Rio de Janeiro. President Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira decided to press the long considered idea of transferring the capital to the interior of Brazil and to make the transfer of the capital the driving issue of his presidency. Inherent in

Kubitschek's goal to oversee the construction of a new capital city was the necessity to render this transfer irreversible to those who would follow him after his presidency was over. This is perhaps what was so appealing about Costa's Pilot Plan. The totalizing aspect of Costa's plan would make the transfer harder to undo.

Related to this, of course, was the fact that Costa intentionally attempted to negate the possibility of outside forces undermining the integrity of his original concept. By predetermining the entire street network and specifying the particular zoning of activities through sectors and subsectors, the Pilot Plan (and Costa) employed a strategy that embodied, in the fullest sense possible, Lefebvre's concept of "the conceived" where the *rules of the game* are set forth in an effort to neutralize the contradictory and sometimes amorphous spatial and social practices of cities.

Another important detail surrounding the conception of the city of Brasilia pertains to the regulation and prescription of settlement within the Pilot Plan. Invoking the necessity to uphold the primary purpose of Brasilia as an administrative city built for the interests of public servants, the government initially granted itself exclusive control and distribution of housing within the Pilot Plan. Only those holding either a position within the civil service or an elected position within the federal government were authorized to reside within the state-owned dwellings. As will be described in more detail below, the social stratification inherent in this policy of denial and exclusion immediately engendered alternative practices.

THE SPONTANEOUS:
SUBVERSIONS AND ALTERNATIVE MEANINGS

Brasilia, as a city, has been regarded by most as a consummate failure. These failures of Brasilia are well known and, at this point, uninteresting except as an understood lesson for the modern city. On the other hand, the progressive and ongoing dissolution of Brasilia, as conceived, by the spatial practices of its "users" is filled with possibilities. It is this Brasilia – as a city of negotiation, of negation, and of occlusion – that holds much more intriguing lessons and secrets. In order to elaborate upon the alternative logic of Brasilia, we must first return to Lefebvre's three-fold concept of space. As outlined above, Lefebvre argues that social space has three specific moments: the conceived, the perceived, and the lived. Put into spatial terms, these three moments translate into representation of space, spatial practice, and representational space. While conceived space or, in spatial terms, representation of space tends to dominate and subordinate by enforcing a logic that attempts to put an end to conflicts and contradictions, spatial practice and representational space – as spaces of action – reinscribe representation of space by putting it "in operation." Spatial practice does this by bringing daily life and daily reality to bear on social space. Representational space

does this by overlaying onto physical space a space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols. In seeking to understand the meaning and implication of these three moments of social space for Brasilia, it may help to continue the study of it's settlement patterns.

The second component of Brasilia's triad of settlement was, in many ways, fueled by the politics of the conceived plan. We can, at least initially, trace the connection of the occurance of spontaneous settlement to the fact that the execution of the capital to Brasilia was to be completed within five years in order to ensure that the transfer would take place during Kubitshek's presidency. Such a monumental task required an enormous labor force which, in turn, instigated the immigration of thousands of workers to the site of the new capital. Although the Pilot Plan had designated a temporary housing area for workers during the construction of the capital, there was, even at the beginning, a serious discrepancy between actual need and the size of the area temporarily given to house these workers. In addition, what was not considered was the probability that a significant portion of this low-income population would remain in the city after its completion. These two situations combined only amplified the inevitable occurance of unauthorized settlement; inevitable because, aside from the causes outlined above, spontaneous settlements or "squatting" has been an inherent social characteristic throughout the history of development in Brazil and is certainly not unique to Brasilia.[3] Squatting has historically provided the lowest layer of the Brazilian social structure with the only possible means of obtain housing and access to urban services. What is unique in the case of Brasilia's spontaneous settlement is a direct outcome of the government's policy denying access to housing within the Pilot Plan. In other Brazilian cities, illegal appropriation of land took place alongside authorized and legal settlement. The absolute spatial occlusion inherent in Brasilia's housing policy actually provoked both an amplified necessity and potency of this political gesture as a *spatial practice.*

Of course, spontaneous settlements undermined the sanctity of Costa's Pilot Plan. They were considered by most officials to be subversive and absolutely negative in the sense that they altered the integrity of the city *as conceived and composed* at the outset. And so, in order to uphold their predetermined plans and programmes, the authorities responded with various tactics used in an attempt to halt illegal appropriation of land. Such tactics often included unannounced eradication or relocation of homes and, although less often, violence, when resistance occurred. This is the classic space of power, where "lived experience is crushed, vanquished by what is conceived."[4] However, the targeted population of tenants responded in kind, using whatever various clandestine tactics were necessary to protect their tenure. Often, the eradication of a particular illegal settlement only served to shift the squatters elsewhere within the Federal District. What is most important is that the social struggle of Brasilia was and still is literally inscribed in space. The political action of the minorities, in the form of occupying and appropriating their own space, injected an entirely different logic of space. As Lefebvre argues, "Socio-political contradictions are realized spatially. The contradictions of space thus make the contradictions of social relations operative. In other words, spatial contradictions "express" conflicts between socio-political interests and forces; it is only *in* space that such conflicts come effectively into play, and in so doing they become contradictions *of* space."[5] These contradictions of space serve to resist the certainty and specificity of cities and, in the case of Brasilia, have actually constructed a *recalibrated* city of negation.

Another example of the inevitable influence of spatial practices and lived spaces upon the conceived in the city of Brasilia centers around *the street.* Terms such as *street and square* serve to distinguish a particular space that corresponds to a specific use of that space, and hence to a **spatial practice** that they express and constitute. The street, as a **representational space**, "is alive: it speaks. It

embraces the loci of passion of action and of lived situations."[6] Through a process of signification, particular societies at specific historical periods establish a specific spatial code and this spatial code provides a means of living in that space, of understanding it, and of producing it. In James Holston's *The Modernist City,* there is an extensive discussion of the history of the street in Brazilian culture. He makes two critical points of particular relevance here. First, he points out that Brazilians expect to experience the daily life and ceremonial activities of crowds in cities primarily because

> they expect to find streets in a city and the street is the customary arena of *movimento* – of public display and transactions of crowds. This expectation is based on the distinction that the very existence of *ruas*, "streets," makes between urban life and rural life. Rural communities do not have *ruas*; rather they have *estradas*, "roads," and *caminhos*, "paths." Only cities – those settlements officially classified, regardless of their size, as *cidades* and *vilas* – have *ruas*. Thus, one of the urbanite's expressions for going downtown, to the commercial center of the city, is *vou a rua*, "I'm going to the street." Therefore, the word "street" signifies "city" because it refers to a particular type of place that only cities have.[7]

Second, Holston points out the importance of the fact that in Costa's plan, the word *street* does not appear. Instead, terms such as radial arteries and Residential Highway Axis are used to describe what has become simply a means of transit. More significantly, the physical form of those arteries have erased all aspects of the street's social and spatial code traditionally found in Brazilian culture.[8] Yet, evidence of resistance to total erasure can be found in the spatial practices of Brasilia. For example, although the commercial sectors of the Asa Sul were built according to the plan, that plan – in practice – has not been followed. The commercial sectors, as conceived, were to have a garden entrance opposite from the street side of the building. The street "back" of the building was to serve as service access. However, from the beginning, the residents subverted this separation of pedestrian and automobile traffic and used the street side rather than the garden side for display windows and public entrance.[9] This type of resistance brings to mind Michel de Certeau argument that "spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life...These multiform, resistant, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised..."[10] This is a critical point, for although much discussion about Brasilia revolves around the notion of two *parallel* cities, it is more relevant – in order to get to the *de facto* Brasilia – to examine the overlap of the conceived spaces with the practiced and lived spaces.

THE RECALIBRATED: *COORDINATES OF REALITY*

Although there are numerous urban circumstances in Brasilia that one could point to in order to reveal the overlapping shifts in the city that move it to a different kind of logic and legibility, one specific example comes to mind what I will call *the territorial lines of settlement.* The struggle between the faithful execution of Costa's Pilot Plan and the actual practices of the squatter population continued, and in 1965 a commission was set up to deal with the situation. One of the results of this commission was the official classification of all settlements existing in contradiction with the original plan of the city. The classification distinguished the officially sanctioned settlements from the illegal settlements and set up very specific territorial lines that corresponded with the three categories of settlement: invasions, encampments, and satellite towns. Fundamentally, the difference between an invasion and an encampment was as follows: "any and every construction *in an unforseen location in the Federal District*, without the authorization of the competent authorities, is considered an "invasion." If this authorization was given, it will be considered an "encampment," which should have an admin-

istrator charged with, among other things, not permitting squatting in the area."[11] A satellite town was considered any settlement well outside of the Pilot Plan with fixed lots and streets and, not incidentally, was almost always consistently founded by the authorities and not the workers. This is simply because the satellite towns were considered completely undesirable to the majority of squatters, due to their isolation and distance from the city, work and necessary provisions.

What is of particular interest in terms of these official classifications is the partial acceptance of certain settlements in unforseen locations of the Federal District and the subsequent authorization of such settlements. This points to a specific **recalibration** *of the conceived* by *spatial practices* that eluded and subverted it's plans and programmes. The new territorial lines of settlement reveal a dramatic intersection of the conceived with the practiced space of the city and involve, in fact, an ongoing process that manifests the inevitable and continuous circumstance of not only Brasilia but cities in general. Other examples of overlaps and intersections exist within Brasilia. The resistance within the Asa Sul commercial sectors mentioned earlier produced a new and unplanned building typology. In response to the resident's rejection of the original separation between street and public entrance, the commercial sectors in Asa Norte contain buildings that are square in plan with display windows and shop entrances on all four sides allowing for a dialogue between street and pedestrian.

The social space of all cities is produced through the continual process of negation and negotiation. Preziosi argues, "Cities and their parts endlessly ostensify, replicate, and palimpsest the differences by which solidarities and individualities are cued and construed...The truth of the city is that it is forever false."[12] This process necessarily includes all three moments of social space. As a case study, Brasilia is important in this sense specifically because the rationality of the conceived, of its techniques, plans, and programmes has been exposed and given an alternative meaning in the actual production of space.

NOTES

[1] Donald Preziosi, "Between Power and Desire: The Margins of the City." *Glyph Textual Studies,* volume 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 237.
[2] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 38.
[3] For an history of spontaneous settlements and town development in Brazil see Roberta Delson, *New Towns for Colonial Brazil: Spatial and Social Planning of the Eighteenth Century* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1979).
[4] Lefebvre, p. 51.
[5] Ibid., p. 365.
[6] Ibid., p. 42.
[7] James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 107.
[8] Ibid., p. 137.
[9] David Epstein, *Brasilia, Plan and Reality: A Study of Planned and Spontaneous Urban Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 100.
[10] Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life,* translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 96.
[11] Epstein, pp.118-19.
[12] Preziosi, p. 237.